

THE PAINTERS OF FURNITURE.

MODERN COPIES OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PIECES.

A Fashion That Began With Italian Dower Chairs and Reached Its Extreme Height Under the Great English and French Furniture Makers—The Imitations.

Painted furniture, of the kind that was decorated by famous artists in the past, is offered for sale in such quantity as to indicate a revival of the taste that introduced it. Some of it comes under the classification of antique and is genuine; other articles are obviously of modern origin, though the dealers may not admit it.

From the days of the Renaissance in Italy till well within the nineteenth century the soft and satiny surface of fine woods was used by the artist as a background for the exhibition of his skill. The antique chest or coffer used by the Venetian artist in the "Golden Age of Italy" was a favored article for decoration, and specimens are yet to be had in which the color is tempered into a mellow glow by the flight of time, and the fine gliding adheres only to the cracks and crevices.

Some of these coffers, when used for jewel cases, were not more than sixteen or twenty inches long. They were covered, accordingly high, and on this small surface was crowded the work not only of the artist, but of the carver as well.

Gripping masks, Cupidons, bows and arrows, flowers and garlands were carved all about the chest and heavily gilded, and on such smooth spots as remained the artist wrought little scenes with Loves sporting about, or if the chest was done to order some incident in the life of the fair owner was used for decoration. Inside the cover was a ponderous lock stoutly made of wrought iron.

Collectors hunt eagerly for these coffers now, and they are to be had, the faded velvet with which they are lined shabby and frayed, and the lock no longer in working order.

You may follow the development of the chest right up to its final absorption in the chest of drawers, and in all countries, including the United States, you will find the color has been used in its adornment.

In the long Italian caskets sometimes the whole sixty-six inches of their length was covered with a procession of painted figures. From time to time these dower chests come into the market, to be eagerly snapped up by such collectors as have long enough purses.

On the Dutch chests you may find a conventional form of floral design, generally greenish and blue, and the decoration is not unlike marquetry in its general appearance. In the panels of tall Dutch hutches or standing coffers will sometimes be found paintings of the Dutch interiors, and Rubens himself did not hesitate to decorate some such objects.

It was in France and England during the eighteenth century that the painting of furniture reached its greatest heights. In fact that century may be termed the golden age of furniture.

The first great name among furniture makers in France is that of Andre-Charles Boulle, who died in 1732. It is interesting to note that in his patent conferring on him the appointment of maker of the royal seals he is described as "architect, painter, carver in mosaic, artist in cabinet work, chaser, inlayer and maker of figures."

During the Regency, Charles Cressent was the Parisian furniture designer. Later in the century the two Caffieri were famous for their decorations, and the three Martin brothers became so famous for their skill in the application of a varnish that they were taken under royal protection. Not very much of their work remains, but fine screens, little cabinets, some state coaches and snuff and patch boxes display their handiwork.

Their chief excellence lay in the way they used the green varnish as a background for cupids and flowers, or used it alone in a waved, striped or flecked pattern. When Robert Martin died in 1765 the skill necessary to carry out this work was lost, and "vernis-Martin" became hardly more than a name.

During the reign of Marie Antoinette styles of furniture changed greatly. The whole surface of the woodwork was painted or gilded, and the decoration was of a more conventional character.

For the Little Trianon the great Risenner made some of his most beautiful pieces, many of which were destroyed or stolen during the Revolution. But to-day pieces by him are being reproduced, and you may buy copies of Risenner's masterpieces which are almost as costly as those that the master made himself.

In England the same use of the artist's work was demanded as in France. It was the four Adam brothers who, starting as architects, finally became designers not only for the house but also for everything that should go into it, that created the rage or painted furniture.

They drew upon classical styles for many of their designs, and in order to harmonize their rooms the furniture in them was often entirely painted a pale green, white and blue, or white alone being often employed. Later they used stucco and whole sets of furniture, and on the smooth surface presented they had painted groups or single figures, garlands of flowers or groups of ornaments, musical instruments, flambeaux, classical arms, etc.

They had in their employ Michael Angelo Pargolesi, who in his turn engaged such artists as Angelica Kauffman, Cipriani, Antonio Zucchi and many of lesser fame to carry out the designs. Angelica Kauffman, not only painted panels on furniture but also painted the ceilings in the rooms where they went, and in London in the neighborhood of Soho Square are still to be found some of these adornments.

Hepplewhite, Sheraton and the less known Shearer used satinwood for furniture and also had it embellished with painting. They too employed Angelica Kauffman and her associates, and table tops and commodes, sideboards and chairs were painted with geometric patterns, wreaths, festoons, garlands and medallions of figures, the veneered satinwood showing a variety of color which shaded from palest gold to red.

Hepplewhite made many of those little settees for which he was famous, with shield backs many of them, and here too were painted the same designs which are associated with the name of Kauffman.

The commodes, which were shaped like a half circle, not only had a painting on the top but on the two doors of the lower part, and painted panels were inserted in unlikely places; as in the backs of state beds, alcove beds, sofa beds, library bookcases, Pembroke tables, pier tables, sideboards, clock cases, knife boxes, standards for busts, all of which are shown in the designs in the makers' pattern books.

Not only are the patterns for decorating the furniture given in the books but explicit directions for making the articles of furniture themselves, so that any cabinet-maker can follow them easily. The result of these concise directions has been unfortunate for the modern collector.

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